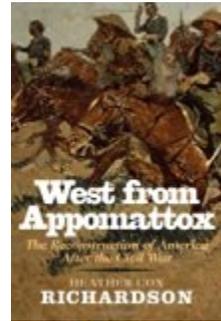


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heather Cox Richardson. *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xi + 396 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11052-4.

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Implicating the Middle Class

Heather Cox Richardson's *West from Appomattox* offers a fresh synthesis of the post-Civil War decades by focusing on the role of the new industrial middle class. Her inspiration for the study comes from the similarity she notes between how people in post-Civil War America derided government at the same time they relied upon it, and the same phenomenon in our own time. The Republican revolution of recent decades has depended upon heated anti-government rhetoric emanating from the "red" states of the South and western plains even though these regions receive a disproportionate share of federal aid. Meanwhile, the "blue" states, whose location Richardson argues coincides with the outline of the Civil War Union, continue to support government activism while receiving less than a dollar back on their taxes. How can we explain the apparent contradiction between rhetoric and practice, as well as the apparent congruence between the political maps from the 1860s and today?

Richardson finds the answer in the post-Civil War period, from 1865 to 1901, and the "heated debate over the proper relationship of the government to its citizens" (p. 1). The principal instigator of the debate was an expanding middle class that encompassed all those who believed they could make it on their own, and who differentiated themselves from the wealthy monopolists above and the threatening poor below. This new middle class enunciated a moral interpretation of socioeconomic difference that contrasted the "true Americans" (those who achieved success through their own efforts and merits)

with the "special interests" (those who sought government favors of one sort or another.) This distinction led the new middle class to lump corrupt politicians and businessmen together with the freedmen, labor activists, agrarian reformers, and feminists. All of these groups sinned, according to their detractors, in seeking special government aid. Since classical liberal political economy held that government intervention led to corruption and imbalances, these special interests threatened the harmony of interests essential to maintaining a free labor economy. Richardson notes that while this debate was not new, it assumed critical importance in the postwar decades because of the imposition of national taxes. Direct taxation by the federal government during and after the Civil War prompted a new relationship between the citizen-taxpayer and the state. The question of the proper sphere of government action became a matter of "personal financial interest to every American" (p. 3).

Drawing from the newspapers, magazines, fiction, paintings, and other cultural artifacts that educated Americans consumed and produced during this time, Richardson seeks to explain the period in their terms. In the course of her research she quickly came to realize that their preoccupations were not those she had been led to assume in reading existing histories of Reconstruction. The South and its racial problems were not what concerned postwar middle-class Americans. Not that they completely disregarded events in the South, but they were equally preoccupied with urbanization, industrialization, and the opening of the West. In fact, the West

played a mythic role in the formation of the new middle class identity as it came to embody the individualist ideal. Richardson's innovation lies in reinterpreting the major developments of the period through the lens of these preoccupations. Refocused in this way, the story of southern Reconstruction becomes one in which the realities of black struggle and white supremacist backlash remain all too real, but the final denouement comes through the withdrawal of middle-class support for government intervention. Similarly, the labor struggle—which attempted to employ the rhetoric of free labor in its quest to establish fair wages, safe workplaces, and the eight-hour day—found itself represented in the middle-class press as a dangerous special interest allied with alien ideologies. The concerns of this newly emerging national middle class played a dominant role in myriad ways, not only in the final failure of Reconstruction in the South, but in the assault on organized labor, the failure of the populists, and, on the plus side, the rise of reform. The middle class, in her estimation, came to be the “worst and best of America,” and its ideology of individual striving and harmonious interests, “the greatest triumph and greatest tragedy of Reconstruction” (p. 7).

Organized chronologically to cover the period from 1865 to 1901, the resulting narrative offers fresh perspectives but in one respect falls short. It is an exceptionally well-written and well-edited text, evidently intended for a broad audience ranging from college undergraduates to today's “educated” readers. The narrative moves seamlessly from the immediate postwar period, through the decades of Reconstruction, to the period of reunion in the late 1890s and the beginnings of the Progressive Era. The individual chapters recount familiar (for students of the period) political, economic, and social events often interpreted through the eyes of contemporary observers, including Carl Schurz, Wade Hampton, black cowboy Nat Love, Samuel Gompers, Juliet Ward Howe, and a host of others. The interweaving of broad overview and first-person accounts makes for lively reading and serves to keep the reader's attention focused. Although the events recounted are familiar enough, Richardson's constant attention to how important outcomes were shaped by the intervention and/or neglect of middle-class actors provides an alternative interpretive angle. Thus, the familiar story of the freedmen's struggle to achieve political, social, and economic justice is set against the growing indifference of the middle-class North to the predicament of the majority of freedmen, while at the same time the former celebrated the accomplishments of the few who succeeded and adopted white middle-class ways. Similarly,

the failure of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's “direct” approach to gaining the vote for women resulted from her assault on middle-class mores, whereas Juliet Ward Howe's indirect approach gained greater acceptance. Samuel Gompers' advocacy of tangible gains in wages and working conditions without challenging the economic system met with similar acceptance. The lesson for the period, and Richardson's broadest claim, is that political, economic, and social outcomes were determined by their adherence or non-adherence to the dominant middle-class ideology of free labor, the harmony of interests, and individualism. Individuals who successfully adapted to this three-tone mantra often met with success—witness the acceptance of Native Americans like Quanah Parker and African American Booker T. Washington.

Richardson's contribution to the historiography of the post-Civil War period rests in her attempt to move beyond the existing mainstream synthesis by implicating northern middle-class actors more fully in the period's outcomes. In doing so, she stands among the vanguard of a newer generation of scholars who are beginning to offer fresh perspectives on Reconstruction and its impact on the nation's subsequent development. While these scholars do not take issue with the major premises regarding the causes and outcomes of the Civil War, they are questioning the bipolar model this interpretation often entails. The South, while unquestionably central to the story of Reconstruction's demise, did not doom it on its own. The North during the same period was no “Treasury of Virtue,” to paraphrase Robert Penn Warren. A fuller understanding of Reconstruction's failures requires investigating how America's middle class, and especially its dominant northern middle class, acted or failed to act. By analogy, Richardson appears to advocate the value of the same kind of analysis for our own time. Rather than focusing on the behavior of neo-Confederates, the extreme Christian Right, and the other marginal, polarizing actors of our political and cultural fabric, her argument suggests that we might be better off considering how the vast middle of contemporary American society is promulgating its own “greatest triumph and tragedy.”

This is a valuable suggestion, but it also highlights what this reviewer believes to be the study's single major flaw. Too much of Richardson's argument is embedded in the narrative. This may be partially due to the book's choice of audience. For the general academic reader for whom the work appears intended, this approach has its merits. At the other end of the spectrum scholars well versed in post-Civil War political history may recognize the argument's various threads with ease. However, for

scholars not specializing in the period, Richardson provides just enough bait with her discussion of free labor, middle class formation, and sectional differences to raise the antennae without always leaving a clear trail to follow. It does seem clear that her use of the crucial term “free labor” derives from Eric Foner’s exposition of the same in his *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1976). She does not, however, entertain the scholarly discussions that followed this exposition including the crucial point raised by Foner himself that different groups in American society understood “free labor” in very different ways and that this difference contributed to the failure of Reconstruction. That a post-Civil War middle class would construe free labor in its classic liberal sense (and in the sense employed by regular Republican rhetors) seems reasonable enough but this raises a further series of questions. What about this middle class and its ideology? And what about the apparent conflation of this middle class with regional attributes and a single ideological commit-

ment? Beginning with Robert Wiebe’s *The Search for Order* (1967), the composition and nature of the post-Civil War middle class has been the object of considerable debate. Historians of the Progressive Era have been especially concerned with determining its potential for reform and/or reaction. This is the crux of the matter in *West from Appomattox* as well. However, historians have also noted how various regional, religious, educational, and occupational variations conditioned these attitudes. Richardson’s reliance on a common ideological commitment helps support a unified argument, but in the process she may have obscured the varieties of middle class formation that may provide the greater clue to extracting this class’s potential for positive social action.

These criticisms aside, *West From Appomattox* is a well-constructed and thought-provoking study. It provides valuable insight into how a dominant set of beliefs serving specific economic and class interests contributed to the failure of Reconstruction.

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